

The Two Kinds of Musical Performers – Which one are you?

by Dennis Winge

In “The Singer’s Ego” by Lynn Eustis, she asks:

“Do we work [on our music] to get attention...or because we are fascinated by music? It may be a question of temperament. I have heard the [German] term *stimmdiva* to refer to musicians who focus on the external elements, such as the attire, the technical perfection, or the attitude. [This is in contrast to the] *kunstdiva* who searches beyond this level for the internal truths about music, striving for honest emotion and meaningful tone color.”

Which type resonates most strongly in you?

Because it’s impossible to discuss the live performance dynamics of musicians based on their temperaments without acknowledging the other necessary ingredient to a performance, let’s talk about audiences first. What does an audience really want from a live performance? It depends on the context. If it’s a concert, they want emotion. If it’s a dinner-party, they want ambience. If it’s a nightclub, they want a strong beat to dance to, and if it’s a café, perhaps they want a good story-telling lyric. Audiences also like a strong personality; someone who smiles, is good-looking, sexy, and well-spoken.

Notice that none of these elements go very deeply into the actual nuances of or artistic substance behind the music. They range in amount of superficiality, with ‘sexy’ being at one end and ‘emotional’ being at the other. None of them really acknowledge music from the artistic side, as even the important element of emotion can be delivered without a substantial message behind it, if the personality delivering it or the passion rendered is strong enough.

This would make the case that the *stimmdivas* have the upper hand. “People don’t listen to music anymore, they watch it.” If you don’t believe this, then try posting a video with just music and a blank screen and see how many views it gets. From this point of view the musicians whose focus is more external have the advantage.

I remember once a conversation between two musicians talking about their success with ‘busking’ in the town square. One was complaining he didn’t make very much money. The other asked him, “Were you standing or sitting? Were you looking at people or at your instrument? Were you smiling or did you have a serious face?” It was obvious from her questions that she understood that in that context, an ‘external’ approach to the music would have been much more favorable.

Now of course these things only go so far. People aren’t stupid. They intuitively feel and react deeply to more sophisticated art, although to some extent it depends on people’s level of education. I personally could never appreciate paintings until I took an

art appreciation class in college. Even thereafter, while I can appreciate the work that went into painting, I still can't clearly distinguish between a good painting and a great one simply because my education in that area was so shoddy.

The counter-argument to that might be "but it's art, so the value is in the eye of the beholder." That is like saying to a lover of wine, "why do you want to learn about how wine is made when you can just buy what you like and ignore the rest?" Certainly the wine-lover can appreciate his favorites even more by knowing how it contrasts to all the rest of the wines in the world.

Regardless of the level of education in the perceiver of the art, or audience member in the case of music, you have to admit that almost everyone will get bored with an artist who gives the same-old performance night after night, year after year, even if it's delivered with passion. If the performer is not an 'artist' in the true sense of the word, the audience will look to get their artistic needs met elsewhere, even if that need is not a conscious one and even if they can't put their dissatisfaction with our hypothetical *stimmdiva* into words.

Classic rock artists (*kunstdivas*) like David Bowie, Peter Dinklage, and Eric Clapton (especially the earlier portion of his career) for example, were ones who constantly reinvented themselves. In jazz the quintessential examples of this are Miles Davis, Herbie Hancock, and John Coltrane. Skip ahead or back 3 or 4 years in tracing a *kunstdiva's* career and they will be doing something completely different.

This is not to say that these temperaments are black and white within each musician. After all, Bowie gained popularity with his outrageous androgynous unitards and lightning bolt makeup. Dinklage had his cloaks and theatrical performances. These artists were successful because they also had an externally dramatic side to them. Was the drama superficial or was it an extension of the artistic vision?

This artistic adventurousness can sometimes allow the artist huge success, and it can also plunge an artist into relative obscurity based on whether that new direction is embraced or not. The peaks and valleys are potentially much greater than the more shallow of musicians, because the artist is concerned with the new direction from the inside and the outer measurement of that success is usually an afterthought. Unfortunately, this introverted tendency can often lead artists down the path of self-destruction or even suicide.

Because of this unpredictability, artists whose careers have taken a plunge might admire *stimmdivas* and learn to become more like them. They may begin to take more pride in their appearance, for example, or their manner of dealing with fans, the press, etc. They may even work with producers and management who help them deliberately move in the direction of the market so that they can achieve more sustainable success. The Yes album *90125* comes to mind here. The band abandoned their previous progressive slant and moved into mainstream rock which was widely embraced and celebrated.

Was this the result of a refinement of an artistic vision (or influence of new band members such as Trevor Rabin) or simply a calculation for market success?

A *stimmdiva* whose career is floundering may wonder where he or she went wrong. Perhaps they've aged out of their sexiness, or are still singing the same songs they did 20 years ago and their audiences have changed their interests, leaving them behind. Those performers may begin to go deeper and assess what it is they are looking to bring into the world, and for the first time begin to consider their contribution as art.

Perhaps it might even be beneficial for musicians of different temperaments to work together and balance each other out, except that unless those musicians are willing to learn from each other and grow, tensions will mount until productivity is hampered. A possible example would be David Lee Roth heading Van Halen, where the vocalist was more externally focused but the band was artistic.

In any case, can you see how the two aspects intertwine and how they are both important? Lynn Eustis writes "Today's [professional musicians] need to do all of these to be successful. [However, it] is very difficult to convince [those] from one camp that the other is important." It's useful to think about where on the continuum you are, and in what areas you need to grow as a performance artist. Note the language we use: "performance artist" means both ingredients are present.